DAWN

OPINION

Unending crisis

COULD something be cooking within the PTI again? Over the weekend, several old and new faces paid visits to the party's otherwise low-profile vice-chairman, ostensibly to 'discuss politics'. On Saturday, former PTI leaders Fawad Chaudhry, Mahmood Maulvi and Imran Ismail called on Shah Mahmood Qureshi at a Lahore hospital, where the incarcerated PTI vice-chairman was recently shifted for medical treatment. It was later reported, however, that they 'returned empty-handed'. A day later, PTI secretary-general Salman Akram Raja called on Mr Qureshi, with party leaders Shaukat Basra and Zaheer Babar in tow. Among other things, the 'current political situation' was on the agenda, party sources said. The attention around the PTI vice-chairman would have gone unnoticed, considering how little one usually hears of him in public discourse, even though Mr Qureshi, too, has been behind bars for a considerable period. However, later remarks from the former PTI leaders put an interesting spin on the situation.

According to the former leaders, the present PTI leadership has completely failed to secure any relief for its jailed leaders. This includes not only Imran Khan, but other 'forgotten' leaders such as Dr Yasmin Rashid, Ejaz Chaudhry, and Omar Sarfraz Cheema, too, not to mention Mr Qureshi. The former leaders' separate statements to the media were variations on this same line. Apparently, they had visited Mr Qureshi to secure his blessings for their 'free Imran Khan campaign', but, according to the PTI vice-chairman's lawyer, were quickly shooed away before they could make their case. The current leaders would have been understandably concerned when they met Mr Qureshi the next day, but whether or not they left reassured was not disclosed. With a senior commentator blaming Mr Khan in their column for 'blocking his party's path' with confrontational politics, it would appear that another attempt at 'minus-ing' Mr Khan may be in the works.

Whatever the case, the PTI should realise that negotiation with other political players has remained an option. It is sheer obduracy that has prevented it from finding a way out of its predicament. With the space narrowing for the exercise of civil liberties, the PTI leadership must consider whether it has been worth making an enemy of everyone in the game — although, sadly, the government, too, has failed to show flexibility towards a political party with arguably the largest support base in the country. The direction in which things are headed could spell disaster for the entire political edifice, and the PTI is currently in no position to protect its constituencies from the fallout if this were to happen. It must, at the very least, demonstrate a sense of responsibility and pay serious thought to how this country's long political crisis can be brought to a negotiated end. There seems to be no other option before it at the moment.

Timely advice

THE World Bank's latest advice to Pakistan to address its imbalanced preferential trade deals with 10 bilateral partners underscores what many experts have long argued: the country's preferential and free trade agreements, focusing narrowly on tariff liberalisation for a limited range of goods, are too shallow to protect its economic interests. This is quite evident from the fact that Pakistan's exports have dropped from nearly 16pc of its GDP in the 1990s to below 10pc in 2024. Not just that, the terms of these pacts have been so skewed in favour of the trading partners that the influx of their exports into Pakistan under these agreements has led to the closure of different industries while rendering others uncompetitive in the domestic market. The Bank notes that almost all countries that have achieved sustained economic growth did so by integrating into global markets. Pakistan, however, has moved in the opposite direction; the periodic growth spurts, when they come, are driven by consumption fuelled by its reliance on debt and remittances rather than from productivity or exports.

Worse, its exports continue to be dominated by low-value textiles and agricultural products, with little sign of diversification into higher-value goods and services. The trade bureaucracy's preference for short-term fixes over sustained trade policy reforms has left exporters to operate in a policy framework that makes them uncompetitive. The Bank estimates that the country has missed exports worth nearly $60bn. The Bank's advice to deepen existing trade agreements and widen their scope beyond tariff liberalisation to cover services, investment and digital trade, besides strengthening institutional capacity for trade agreement negotiations and monitoring, is sound. It also has advised regular consultations with exporters and industry stakeholders to align the nation's trade policy with actual business opportunities. Yet the challenge lies not in identifying solutions but in executing them. That Pakistan has failed to utilise the preferential trade agreements as instruments for growth through investments and trade facilitation had become obvious a long time ago. Yet no action has ever been taken to rectify the situation. The Bank's advice is timely and needs to be heeded. If Pakistan is to make a policy shift towards an export-led growth model, as has repeatedly been iterated by top government officials, it must renegotiate all bilateral trade pacts to integrate into global value chains and attract investment.

Nigeria 'genocide'

DONALD Trump's threat to go into Nigeria "guns-a-blazing" to rescue the country's Christian population from Islamist militants is highly inflammatory. The US leader has, once again, threatened to violate the borders of a sovereign country in pursuit of nebulous policy aims that are a mix of fact, fiction and far-right conspiracy theory. These words coming from the leader of the world's primary military power only serve to reinforce the image of the 'ugly American', and make a mockery of international norms. Furthermore, his reference to Nigeria as a "disgraced country" is extremely undiplomatic and unbecoming of a world leader. Mr Trump's military threat to the African state stems from his belief that Christian Nigerians are being slaughtered by terrorists associated with Boko Haram and the local IS affiliate. While Nigeria has suffered from intense militant violence over the past few decades, as the numbers point out, most of the terrorists' victims have, in fact, been Muslim. As is the case with such extremist groups the world over, they consider only themselves to be on the right path, and all others as 'apostates'. Nigeria has also suffered from religious violence. Yet the answer to both threats of terrorism and communal strife is hardly American military intervention. Other states should also take note of such intentions, as along with Nigeria, the US also considers China, Russia and Pakistan as "countries of particular concern" over their alleged violations of religious freedom.

Firstly, each state must address religious or ethnic ruptures internally. If foreign states want to help, they can work with the respective administration to strengthen counterterrorism, or work on communal peacebuilding. Threatening a sovereign state with military action is no solution. Moreover, using provocative language, and playing up religious divisions, is unbecoming of world leaders. Therefore, Mr Trump should reconsider his ill-conceived threats to attack Nigeria in the name of 'saving' its Christian population.

BY ARIFA NOOR

Discovering local issues

Why should one assume that legislators would pass a law with the same intent as a military despot?

IN these polarised times, it is just not the people but also the politicians who are at war with each other. And their attacks on each other in television studios have become the only truth in town, so much so that when they do come together for the greater good, it is rarely noticed and even more rarely appreciated. Consider the moment some years ago when they all joined hands to give Gen Bajwa's extension legal cover. It was for the greater good, few realised back then, as they were busy castigating the parliamentarians.

There was a similar moment in Punjab recently when everyone in the assembly came together to pass a resolution demanding local governments! Jointly sponsored by young MPAs from the PML-N and the PPP, the draft was so impressive that the PTI lot in parliament also voted for it. The two sides might be at war at the centre and elsewhere but in Punjab everyone was in the mood for love — with LGs.

And they have asked for LGs which are constitutionally protected, with defined tenures and responsibilities. It also asked that fresh elections be held within 90 days of the completion or dissolution of the LGs and for linking the provincial finance commission to the NFC.

Not only did the legislators come together to ask for this, the Speaker of the assembly, Malik Ahmed Khan, who has in the past been known not just for his generous defence of his party but also of Gen Bajwa, also took the time out to support the resolution in a press conference. According to a news report, he warned that the relationship between the state and the people weakens if there is no effective local governance. He also blamed successive governments for undermining the LG system and cautioned political parties against shortening LG terms for political convenience.

What a slap in the face all this was for those who blame the politicians for being against LGs and disinterested in the needs of the people.

But it has been decades of socialisation against the political class. And the distrust is so high that it is hard to understand why these politicians who are concerned about LGs were also on board when the Punjab Assembly recently passed a law which seems to contradict the very principles they are so anxious about.

The new legislation was passed as recently as last month and is criticised for allowing the real power to lie with the provincial government and the bureaucracy. And what has received even more attention is that the new law provides for party-less LG elections — but only up to votes being cast and counted. After that, the footloose and fancy-free victors can join a political party within 30 days. But no more.

Those conditioned to distrust politicians point out that this is rather reminiscent of the elections held by Gen Ziaul Haq. Fearing a win by the PPP, he too held party-less elections in the hope that it would throw up a parliament he could control easily.

But this is a bit of a stretch. After all, why should anyone, however sceptical of politicians, assume that legislators would pass a law with the same intent as a military dictator? And secondly, who in their right mind would assume that elected politicians at present would behave the same way as their predecessors from 40 years ago? The world has changed since and so has Pakistan.

Indeed, if one has to provide a comparison with what happened 40 years ago, the 1985 assembly and the then prime minister Mohammad Khan Junejo proved so troublesome that Zia was forced to let them go. But at present there are no such issues in these times of hybrid togetherness where the politicos and the establishment are singing '*hum saath saath hain*'.

Indeed, there is little reason to question this happily ever after. Which also appears to be rather organic. In fact, it is just a coincidence that the politicians in the Punjab Assembly discovered the importance and necessity of LGs at a time when Islamabad is abuzz (it has been for months) about the discussions in a nearby town about how to 'fix' governance and the economy. Would it simply require a rejigging of the NFC to address economic issues, or would there also be a need to address some governance matter by dividing the four provinces further? Many argued that new provinces would prove to be too politically difficult and empowered LGs might be easier to ensure. And with all this talk of solutions came the rumour that the impending 27th constitutional amendment (which was simply a case of when rather than if) would be used to make more changes than just continue tweaking the judiciary.

However, no one really has any concrete answers at the moment and so far the government has insisted it is not working on any draft of a possible amendment. This is the answer more than one government minister has given during interviews. But an opposition member has set the proverbial cat among the pigeons; Kamran Murtaza, a JUI-F senator, has said during a talk show on television that the draft of the 27 amendment to the Constitution may be laid in parliament soon enough.

Oh dear! I seem to have digressed far from the matter at hand. The Punjab Assembly politicians care so much about the people that they want constitutionally protected LGs. A greater good that they all — PPP, PML-N and PTI — came together to ask for it. We the people should appreciate this grand gesture and not question it.

Postscript: As these lines were being written Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari posted on X that the PML-N has approached the PPP for support on the 27th amendment which addresses a number of matters including the NFC. ■

The writer is a journalist.

BY JAWED NAQVI

The power of a gentle prayer

TO appreciate the cricketing acumen of Jemimah Rodrigues and her feisty teammates as also the women players from distant lands who played in last week's World Cup matches, I should lean on an aphorism my daughter shared with me: Half the world is women. The other half is their children. What then accounts for the vile invectives flung at Jemimah Rodrigues?

For want of a better explanation, Pablo Neruda's lines from the 'Fable of the mermaid and the drunks' could help us see the viciousness on display in the cowardly caverns of the internet. Neruda's searing lines describe a trusting mermaid who strays into a tavern of drunk and abusive men. "They blackened her with burnt corks and cigarette stubs/ and rolled around laughing on the tavern floor/ She did not speak because she had no speech … Her lips moved, silent, in a coral light, and suddenly she went out by that door/ Entering the river she was cleaned, shining like a white stone in the rain…"

Jemimah played an innings of her life to outwit a formidable Australian team thereby putting India into the finals against South Africa. Her teammates, chiefly the one who was summoned at the last minute to stand in for an injured colleague and who took the best performance prize in the final match to mock the selectors, brought back elegance and class that had eluded Indian cricket in recent years. Jemimah was viciously trolled after she gave the credit for her outstanding performance to Jesus Christ. There's a background to it. Her father was stripped of his membership of the prestigious Hindu Gymkhana Club in Mumbai last year over communally inspired claims he sought to convert people to Christianity on the club's premises. The father denies the charge. That plus the stress of being kept on her toes perpetually by the selectors was as good a reason as any for her to share her angst publicly.

Which player does not have a prayer on their lips when they brace for a tense contest? Is there a dearth of Indian players or their fans who perform *yagnas* and make temple visits to seek boons for this or that game? No less a person than Gandhiji was a devotee of Christ, quoting often from the Sermon on the Mount. And forget not how Diego Maradona described his World Cup winning goal against England in 1986. Impishly and not without double entendre he said: "It was a little with the head of Maradona, a little with the hand of God."

The ugliness we witnessed from Indian fans (and some players) towards Pakistan's squad in a recent cricket contest is sought to be passed off as an aspect of national fervour. How then shall we explain pretty much the same louts attacking a quality Indian player like Jemimah Rodrigues? Let's face it. Contrary to a widely indulged belief, sports and politics have seldom if ever been separated from each other, and the connection precedes the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia. Denying the bond is a fool's errand. It was Europe that collectively conjured the idea of the modern nation state, paving the way for newfound but eventually vulgarised nationalism to tether the fleet-footed human spirit to a yard of coloured cloth. (The non-resident India for all his shortcomings is at least honest in switching his national loyalty at will.) The idea of thousands of years old nationhood claimed by some Indians is clearly a canard. Before the 17th-century innovation of frozen borders, human loyalties and identities would change by staying still while empires expanded and contracted around them. Else it would have been tricky for Shelley to compose *Ozymandias* as a commentary on how egos of transient men in power are laid low by the vagaries of time.

> Which player does not have a prayer on their lips when they brace for a tense contest?

Given that the history of sports precedes the innovation called nationalism, it is safe to conclude that elements other than those driven by national identity were in orbit when Indian players were ordered not to shake hands with Pakistani players. The sickening behaviour while insincere was not much different from say the mealy-mouthed boycott of the Moscow Olympics by the West, which Pakistan and some others had dutifully embraced. That decision may have unwittingly allowed the Indian hockey team to walk away with the gold medal, it's last in Olympics. However, what was posited in the 1980s to be in Pakistan's national interest would be described by senior Pakistan ministers in recent days to have been a grave and self-harming error.

It cannot be national interest that admiring Brian Lara or Donald Bradman is a most agreeable thing to do but applauding the swinging yorkers of Pakistani bowlers is not. The narrow national spirit was in abeyance when Yuri Gagarin and Neil Armstrong defied gravity to applaud the questioning spirit of Galileo. Likewise with sport. When Bob Beamon scaled improbable heights to become an invincible long jump athlete in Mexico City the world cheered on.

To underscore the link between politics and sports, the origin of the marathon was rooted in a political legend. It was a minor military victory that the Athenian city state scored over the formidable Persian empire of Darius. The ancient Greek legend Pheidippides, ran from the battle site of Marathon to Athens in 490 BC to announce the Athenian victory over the Persians. The modern marathon was created for the 1896 Olympic Games to honour this story. Curiously, when Hitler staged the 1936 Berlin Olympics to legitimise Nazi rule, no Western country thought of boycotting the games. Instead, the US sent Jesse Owens, the legendary African-American athlete who won four gold medals. While his participation challenged Hitler's racist worldview it also threw a convenient cover on America's own racist reality. The World Cup victory should help lift the veil from the anti-women subterfuge being perpetrated by a combination of nationalism and religion in India today. ■

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